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Tobacco District Rehabilitation Project  
Danville  
Pittsylvania County  
Virginia

HAER No. VA-31

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VA,  
72-DANV  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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Tobacco District Rehabilitation Project:  
Danville, Virginia

VA-31

Location: Southeast of the Central Business District, west of the Dan River

Dates of Erection: ca. 1870-1930

Significance: The Tobacco District, near the center of the city of Danville, Virginia, is composed of handsome, under-utilized tobacco warehouses and declining mill-workers residences. It is adjacent to the central business district of the city, and is representative of the industrial development of the post Civil War South. The geographic point of origin for the city is within the Tobacco District, at the fall line of the Dan River.

Danville is located in the western uplands of the Piedmont region of Virginia on the Dan River, approximately two miles above the North Carolina border. The current (1978) population is approximately 45,700 residents. Occupation can be traced to the Paleo-Indian period of pre-7,000 BC, with specific evidence of Archaic and Woodland period sites (dating from 5,000 BC to the European contact period).

The first Europeans recorded in the area were a party of surveyors led by William Byrd in 1728. They camped near the site of present Danville while mapping the boundary line between North Carolina and Virginia. The falls of the Dan River provided a natural location for the development of trade, fishing and agriculture. Tobacco cultivation in the area was sufficient by 1793 to warrant installation of a State tobacco inspection warehouse. This was established by the General Assembly in that year, along with the incorporation of the city of Danville.

As a fall line city Danville enjoyed some early commercial advantages, but both Alexandria and Richmond, VA, were also fall line cities and their large, direct river outlets to the sea made them commercially predominant throughout the Antebellum period. For Danville, the long trip down the Dan River to the Roanoke River in North Carolina, down the Roanoke River to the Albemarle Sound, up the Sound and through the Dismal Swamp to Norfolk did little to encourage commercial development.

(continued)

A canal around the falls of the Dan was completed as early as 1818, but prospects for development did not improve until the city established a direct rail connection with Richmond in 1856. The site of the canal and the location of the main railroad tracks are within the Tobacco District and characterize their central role in Danville's early commercial growth.

Tobacco remained the primary crop and trade commodity produced during this period. The "Danville System" of tobacco inspection, established in 1858, freed buyers from having to examine individual hogsheads by allowing the inspection and purchase of loose-leaf tobacco. During the Civil War many tobacco houses in Richmond moved their holdings to Danville for safekeeping. The Dibrell Tobacco Co. moved to Danville during this time and one of their buildings, completed in 1872, is the oldest structure in the Tobacco District.

The new "plug and twist" tobacco manufacture technology of the 1870s and early 1880s created a successful group of speculative entrepreneurs in Danville. The Imperial Tobacco Company, The Pemberton & Penn Tobacco Company, and the F.X. Buxton & Co. are creations of this period. The number of tobacco leaf dealers and "rehandling" plants (where tobacco is prepared for sale to the manufacturer) doubled in Danville in the 1880s and early 1890s. The "Tobacco Trust," one of the financial conglomerates that reshaped American capitalism in the late nineteenth century, emerged during this decade. The founding of the American Tobacco Company in 1890 forecast the end for many of the smaller tobacco firms in Danville. Within a few years the larger firms of American, Imperial, Liggett & Myers, and R.J. Reynolds dominated the district.

The rise of industrial development from 1880 to 1910 created a correlating increase in residential development in the neighborhood contiguous to the Tobacco District. This land was originally the estate of Nathaniel T. Green. It was purchased by speculative developers such as the Riverview Land Company and the W.J. Dance Company. Most of the structures built were three- to six-room dwellings that initially cost from \$300 to \$500 to construct. These houses are good examples of the building types constructed for the expanding working class during this period of rapid industrial growth in the south. Most are one and two story, single family structures. They are generally very simple and straight-forward in design, with stylistic treatment and character provided by gabled tin roofs and ornamented front porches.

Commercial services are provided in the area by five local grocery stores (the "Mom & Pop" type), dating from the turn of the century. There are seven churches, of various denominations, within the district.

References: The above information has been assembled from a HAER Inventory compiled in 1978 by Gary Grant, Barbara Handy, and Donna Ware; and from the U.S. Department of the Interior, HCRS, publication:

Rehabilitation: Danville 1978, "A Strategy for Building Reuse and Neighborhood Conservation", Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1979

Additional information is available from HAER Inventory Cards: Danville, VA;  
enclosed in accompanying Field Records

Transmitted by: Kevin Murphy, Historian HAER, June 1984